

Workplace Bullying and Organizational Culture: Enabling Factors in a Brazilian University

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This research aims to describe the cultural elements of a Brazilian public university that can facilitate workplace bullying. It's characterized as qualitative and descriptive, with the application of an online questionnaire (214 responses), followed by 12 semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed according to content analysis and descriptive statistics. It was possible to identify cultural characteristics present in both the organizational culture and management of Brazilian public institutions, which, according to participants, favor workplace bullying at the University, such as impunity, power groups, politics, and mischaracterization of public servants. Therefore, the research contributed to the strengthening of the theory, opening opportunities for the development of measures and policies to prevent and combat harassment in universities.

Keywords: workplace bullying, organizational culture, work, university, public servants.

Acoso laboral y cultura organizacional: factores facilitadores en una universidad brasileña

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo describir los elementos culturales presentes en una universidad pública brasileña identificada como facilitadora del acoso laboral. Se caracteriza como cualitativa y descriptiva, con la aplicación de cuestionario online (214 respuestas) y 12 entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los datos se analizaron según análisis de contenido y estadística descriptiva. Se identificaron características culturales presentes en la cultura y gestión de las instituciones públicas brasileñas, que según los pesquisados favorecen situaciones de acoso laboral en la Universidad, tales como: impunidad, grupos de poder, política y caracterización errónea del servidor público. Por tanto, la investigación aporta en la profundización de la teoría, abriendo oportunidades para la construcción de medidas y políticas para prevenir y combatir el acoso en las universidades.

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Palabras-clave: acoso laboral, cultura de la organización, trabajo, universidad, servidores públicos.

Assédio moral no trabalho e cultura organizacional: fatores propiciadores em uma universidade brasileira

Esta pesquisa objetiva descrever os elementos culturais presentes em uma universidade pública brasileira identificados como facilitadores ao assédio moral no trabalho. Caracteriza-se como qualitativa e descritiva, com a aplicação de um questionário on-line (214 respostas), seguido de 12 entrevistas semiestruturadas. Os dados foram analisados de acordo com a análise de conteúdo e estatística descritiva. Identificou-se características culturais presentes na cultura e na gestão de instituições públicas brasileiras, os quais segundo os pesquisados favorecem situações de assédio moral no trabalho na Universidade, tais como: impunidade, grupos de poder, política e descaracterização do servidor público. Portanto, a pesquisa corrobora no aprofundamento da teoria, e assim, abrindo espaço para a construção de medidas e políticas para prevenir e combater o assédio nas universidades.

Palavras-chave: assédio moral no trabalho, cultura organizacional, trabalho, universidade, servidores públicos

Public organizations, which are regarded as dynamic, complex, interdependent and interrelated coherent systems, are created to provide services and welfare to society (Pires & Macedo, 2006). Brazilian public organizations present basic features such as high bureaucracy, attachment to rules and routines, overvaluation of hierarchies, paternalism in relations, and clinging to power (Pires & Macedo, 2006). It is possible to perceive that the same characteristics are presented in the structures and practices of public universities, which are the research locus of this study. Nevertheless, as in any other organization, universities are under pressure and influence from many agents, such as society, the market, and even the State. They can cause changes in university practices and, consequently, in their culture. Thus, it seems possible to infer that the current situation of universities is increasingly turbulent, which reflects several problems in Brazilian society, organizations, and culture (Nunes & Torga, 2020).

While university organizations have expert professionals in different fields of knowledge, their practices are often ambivalent. For example, professors establish a discourse of cooperation and teamwork, whereas competition for the acquisition and maintenance of a position is emphasized (Nunes, 2011; Nunes et al., 2019). In this clash, individualism, fear of losing power or position, trampling of ethics, achievement of objectives regardless of the means, and acceptance of dirty work become strategies, which demonstrate the existence of a structural, cultural, and behavioral problem in society, in the organization, and in the individual himself (Nunes, 2011).

This unethical and disrespectful behavior is constantly practiced by managers and/or workers in their workplace, as many are embedded in the culture of these organizations. This environment can also instigate violent relationships, humiliation, exclusion, or, in other words, workplace bullying (Nunes & Torga, 2020). Workplace bullying can be defined as repeated hostile actions, behaviors, and practices directed

toward one or more workers, which can cause harm to the mental and/or physical integrity of the individual, as well as interfere with work performance and the environment itself (Glambek, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018) and/or affect the victim's personality, dignity, or mental and physical integrity. This violent relationship is not essentially interpersonal and may be much more complex, since it considers the individual as a product of socio-historical construction; subject and producer of interrelations that occur in the social environment, with its rules and laws (Heloani & Barreto, 2018).

By situating public universities, especially in Brazil, their management and culture may serve as promotive factors for violence against workers, which may lead to workplace bullying (Nunes et al., 2019). There is mention that organizational culture can be a factor that promotes workplace bullying, however, they do not mention the elements that may influence it. (Einarsen et al., 2020; Heloani & Barreto, 2018; Nunes, 2011; Nunes et al., 2019; Salin, 2003). Therefore, this study aims to describe the cultural elements of a Brazilian public university that can facilitate workplace bullying. Although it is a recognized problem, the prevalence of workplace bullying in Brazilian higher education is still underreported, but studies indicate that the education sector is one of the most affected by this type of violence (Hirigoyen, 2015; Nunes & Tolfo, 2015). In universities, workplace bullying occurs among students, professors, and staff, whether they are perpetrators and/or victims (Chapell et al. 2004). Hubert e Van Veldhoven (2001) compared several work sectors and behaviors associated with workplace violence and found that respondents from the academic sector reported the second highest rate (54%) of workplace bullying situations. Acosta et al. (2015) found in their research with faculty members at the Universidad Veracruzana in Mexico that 100% of the participants witnessed some form of psychological violence in the workplace. With 5.2% having experienced medium to high intensity bullying, and 66.2% being subjected to widespread violent behavior. In the study by Nunes and Tolfo (2015) at a Brazilian federal university, it was found that 14.8% of faculty and staff experience workplace bullying situations weekly or daily.

The growing concern with the issue has led universities to develop institutional policies to address it, such as the creation of specialized ombudsman offices, ethics committees, and prevention and support chambers, reflecting an effort to create safer and more transparent work environments (Nunes et al., 2019). It is crucial to emphasize that, in recent years, legislation and guidelines have evolved to strengthen the development of preventive and response actions, as exemplified by: a) NR (NR 01 - general provisions and occupational risk management, amended by MTE Ordinance No. 344, dated March 21, 2024), which aims to establish the general provisions regarding occupational health and safety, as well as the guidelines and requirements for occupational risk management and preventive measures in Occupational Health and Safety - OHS); b) NR 05 (the Internal Commission for the Prevention of Accidents and Bullying - CIPAA, amended by Ordinance No. 4,219, of 12/20/2022), which aims to prevent work-related accidents and illnesses by promoting the preservation of workers' lives and health; c) Decree No. 12,122, of July 30, 2024, which establishes the Federal Program for the Prevention and Response to Bullying and Discrimination within the scope of the direct federal public administration, as well as autonomous agencies and foundations.

It seems to be relevant to point out the contribution of the present study, which promotes a deeper understanding of the theory through the identification of the elements that influence the occurrence of workplace bullying. Therefore, there is scientific and social relevance, since it aids the prevention and combat of workplace bullying, a phenomenon that must be deeply understood. Additionally, this research may help university managers achieve a more precise and holistic perception of the influence of organizational culture and practices in the context of the institution and the lives of its employees.

Finally, the significance of this study is also related to the possibility of perceiving the university, which is the object of the research, through the eyes of its different actors, thus enabling the construction of an empirical and theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the results obtained may help other universities, as they do not reflect the context of a single institution.

Workplace bullying

When considering the various existing concepts, it is important to distinguish the terms that are frequently used. The term workplace bullying, more common in Anglo-Saxon literature, generally refers to repeated hostile acts directed at an individual. Meanwhile, the term mobbing, of European origin, often describes a process of collective harassment, where a group turns against a target. We consider the terms to be similar, and, in this work, we adopt the concept of workplace bullying as defined by Brazilian researchers such as Heloani and Barreto (2018), who present the current characteristics of workplace bullying (Nunes & Torga, 2020). Heloani e Barreto (2018) define workplace bullying as abusive, intentional, frequent and repetitive conduct, which occurs in the work environment, whose causality is related to the ways of organizing work and organizational culture, which aims to humiliate and disqualify an individual or a group, degrading their working conditions, reaching their dignity and putting their personal and professional integrity at risk. Essa definição é particularmente relevante para este estudo, pois alinha o fenômeno aos fatores culturais que pretendemos investigar.

The concept brings the causality of harassment due to the forms of work organization and organizational culture has an important aspect. These elements are not new to the theme but inserting them in this context strengthens what many authors have commented about the phenomenon (Nunes et al., 2018; Pheko et al., 2017). The authors believe that culture and organizational practices can favor workplace bullying through cultural traits present in organizations and society itself, as will be explained in this study.

Bullying is a complex and dynamic process in which the actions and reactions should be understood in the social context in which they occur. Therefore, situational factors may increase the vulnerability of targets and contribute to their reaction to hostile behavior (Einarsen et al., 2020; Glambek et al., 2020; Salin & Hoel, 2020). Bullying is also an organizational problem, as it occurs in the labor environment. Consequently, the organization is co-responsible for the occurrence or exemption of these behaviors (Einarsen et al., 2020; Nunes et al.,

2018). Thus, it is the organization's responsibility to identify organizational factors that instigate workplace bullying, which are changes in the nature of work, work processes and structures, organizational culture and climate, and leadership (Nunes et al., 2019; Salin, 2003; Salin & Hoel, 2020).

There is no denying that social, economic, and societal values influence organizations, more specifically their practices, policies, and culture, as there are several trends and changes in society that affect the prevalence of bullying in the workplace (Einarsen et al., 2020; Heloani & Barreto, 2018; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). In other words, bullying is a complex social phenomenon characterized by its multicausality, involving psychological, interpersonal, organizational and social aspects (Einarsen et al., 2020). From this, it is possible to understand the dynamics of bullying through the framework reviewed by Salin (2003), as illustrated in Figure 1.

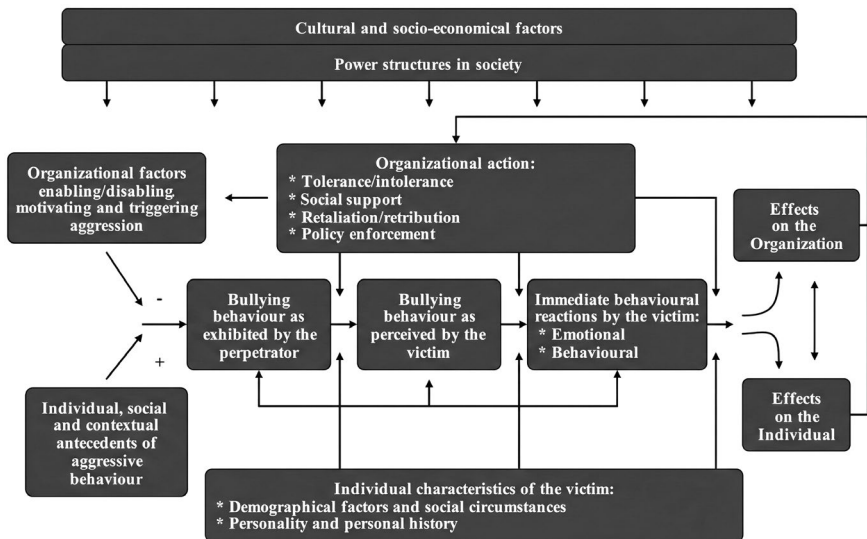


Figure 1. Revised framework of bullying

Note. Source: adapted from Salin (2003)

The framework provides an overview of how individual, organizational, cultural, and societal factors can contribute to the different stages of the bullying process. Cultural and socioeconomic factors, and consequently, power structures, affect all variables in this model. Different national or local cultures can influence how conflict in the workplace is controlled or the tolerance level of aggressive behavior (Salin, 2003). In turn, socioeconomic factors can affect organizational practices, that is, how workers are treated and how much attention the organization is willing to pay for this “small” conflict (Salin, 2003).

Although bullying exists in all sectors, there is a larger number of occurrences in the public sector in most countries, especially in the social and health, public administration and education sectors (Hirigoyen, 2015). Since the public sector targets public welfare in a social scheme, abuses that occur in that specific environment seem to draw more attention. It is possible to notice that bullying is usually not related to productivity but to power struggles. In this case, it is not possible to free people from their responsibility, incriminating profit related to capitalism and globalization, only being able to link bullying to a fundamental psychological dimension, envy and greed, which lead individuals to control others and want to take them out of the way (Hirigoyen, 2015).

By analyzing a number of Brazilian and public sector cultural characteristics, scholars, such as Hofstede et al. (2010), Freitas (1997), Pires and Macedo (2006), Prates and Barros (1997) and Carbone (2000), it is possible to infer that Brazilian public universities can present some Brazilian cultural and public service characteristics, which may include: bureaucracy, hierarchy, authoritarianism/centralization, personalism, trickery and cunningness (to take personal advantage), concentration of power, impunity, conformism, loyalty to people, paternalism, lack of planning and control, among others. These features contribute to gaps in establishing rules and standards that can provide a healthy work environment and diminish situations of violence and constraints, such as workplace bullying.

Thus, if an organization is transparent in its actions, punishments are conducted when there is abuse. However, the opposite was observed: permissiveness and impunity are present in many Brazilian public institutions (Prates & Barros, 1997). In these, especially in university organizations, political patronage, social networks, and being a member of the dominant group allow attackers to perpetuate their abusive actions (Nunes et al., 2019). These situations necessarily cause public employees to be disappointed in relation to their work and the image they had of the organization, affecting their work and development, organizational membership, and health, among other consequences (Nunes & Torga, 2020).

In some publications in the Brazilian administration field, especially on National Association of Post-graduation and Research in Administration (ANPAD), events between 2001 and 2013, from 35 studies on bullying, 12 have universities as their analytical universe (Nunes & Tolfo, 2015). Among them, most have focused on professors because of the precariousness and deterioration of their occupation, as well as the fierce competition and unbridled quest for productivity. Nevertheless, technical-administrative employees are also subject to historical violence within universities, as they are often diminished by professors as if they were incompetent and servile to a higher category (Nunes et al., 2018).

Data from the Federal Court of Accounts (TCU, 2025) highlights the lack of anti-bullying policies in universities and the need for actions to address the increase in reported cases. The TCU evaluated the effectiveness of prevention and anti-bullying systems in federal universities, revealing that 60% of institutions do not have adequate policies. Between 2021 and 2023, there was a 44.8% increase in legal proceedings related to sexual harassment, with more than 360,000 new cases filed, underscoring universities as frequent environments for bullying occurrences. The audit aimed to encourage the implementation of effective policies in universities, with the goal of creating a safer and more respectful environment, promoting justice and equity in higher education. For example, the audit found that among the 28 universities

that have such policies, 19 have regulatory gaps. Furthermore: 50 universities do not offer training programs on the subject; 51 lack protocols for welcoming and guiding victims to prevent re-victimization; 55 have no guidelines regarding the composition and actions of investigation teams with a gender perspective (TCU, 2025). It is important to highlight that, even though there are already regulations and laws on the prevention and combating of moral harassment, such as NR01, NR05, and Decree No. 12,122/2024.

It is important to recognize that bullying occurs in the academic field as in any other organization; that is, it is not a rare and sporadic situation. Although universities wish to be places of rationality, confidence in logic and evidence, and tolerance, which is ideal in truth, they are subject to the same forces and influences that affect different working environments (Westhues, 2015). These forces, which can be internal or external, have a negative impact on organizational culture and practices, as well as the behavior of workers, thus favoring the occurrence of violence, especially workplace bullying.

Method

The research used qualitative approach, which is justified due to the subjective nature of the themes – workplace bullying and cultural aspects – and the procedures used in the data collection and analysis. That is, the topics covered in this article and the relationship among each other are closely linked to this approach, since they express a set of subjective aspects and meanings, which often cannot be translated to numeric variables.

Participants

The participants were composed of professors and technical-administrative servants from a Brazilian federal university. The selection of these groups aims to provide a more holistic view of the university's workers, in order to gather perceptions for a more in-depth analysis

—rather than analyzing professors or staff in isolation. The chosen University had approximately 2.540 professors (higher and elementary education) and 3.174 technical-administrative employees. Therefore, the population was composed of 5.174 employees. It was decided not to define a sample in this research, since researchers were able to reach out and send the survey to the entire population. The study was disclosed by the University's communication sector, as well as emails sent to the employees, whose electronic addresses were obtained through institutional websites.

Although the researcher had access to the research population, it was not possible to reach all of them; therefore, the accessible population totaled 214 respondents to the online questionnaire — which constituted the first stage of this research. In this online instrument, there was a question asking whether the participant would be available to be interviewed, thus providing more information about the research phenomena. Of the 214 respondents, 30 stated that they would be willing to be interviewed and provided their contact information. Additionally, some emails were received with the same intention. From this list of individuals eligible to be interviewed, some participants were filtered and selected based on their responses to the questionnaire, with the main criterion being a high frequency of situations characteristic of workplace bullying and other relevant characteristics. After this first filter, an effort was made to select a similar number of professors and technical-administrative staff of both genders, and from different sectors to have a broader overview of the institution. Twenty individuals were selected for interviews, and thus an email was sent to schedule them — which received responses from 12 participants.

Regarding the participants, some data stands out. In the gender aspect, 53,3% of the female audience participated in the research, which corresponds to 114 responses — 15 more than the male. In the age group, most participants (41.1% or 88 respondents) are aged between 25 and 35. As for the service time, 49.5% (106) work at the university for 1 to 5 years. In other words, they represent employees who entered recently in the organization. In relation to education, 82.2% (176) have

post-graduation degree, which means a high qualification of workers. Most survey respondents (116 or 54.2%) are technical-administrative staff. The type of employment with the highest incidence is full-time (40 hours per week), corresponding to 50.9% (109), followed by Exclusive Service with 43.9% (94), and 80.8% (173) do not occupy positions of direction or management. Regarding the 12 interviewed participants, 10 of them were women, 11 have post-graduation degree (specialization, master's or doctorate), 6 are professors, and the other 6 are technical-administrative employees, and 7 have been working for 1 to 5 years in the organization.

Procedure

Data was collected in two stages. First, there was an online questionnaire answered by 214 participants. Then, 12 semi-constructed interviews were conducted with participants who agreed to describe situations and experiences in the organization in more details, in addition, they were chosen upon prior analysis of the responses. The interviews, with the participants' permission, were recorded and transcribed. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions that addressed organizational culture and practices (questions about: organizational history, institutional management policies, institutional regulations, institutional values, teaching and technical staff, experiences within the institution), workplace bullying (understanding of workplace bullying, situations, aspects of violence, characteristics of the aggressor, consequences, reporting, practices and discourse), and the relationship between these topics. The semi-structured interview guide also covered questions from these categories, aiming to delve deeper into certain aspects. The instruments were based on authors who research this topic, such as Fleury (1996), Schein (2009), Freitas (2007), Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers (2009), Einarsen et al. (2020), Hofstede et al. (2010), Nunes (2011).

Data analysis

After the data collection through the online questionnaire and interviews, the next step was the analysis and interpretation of the results. Therefore, it was necessary to create and recreate dimensions, categories, subcategories and analysis elements. The results were then analyzed using content analysis approach, which consists of a set of communication analysis techniques, which aim to obtain indicators through systematic and objective procedures of description of the messages' content, enabling knowledge inference regarding the context during the generation of these messages (Bardin, 2016). The analysis was carried out following the steps suggested by Bardin (2016): pre-analysis; exploration of the material (the documents, questionnaire responses, and interview transcriptions) and the treatment of results; inference and interpretation. The categories of analysis emerged from the data itself and were organized around the cultural factors perceived as facilitators of bullying. Based on the transcription of the interviews and the questionnaire data, tables (matrices) were created to analyze the information obtained, as a way to minimize any interpretative bias. It is important to highlight that the focus of the research is to describe the cultural elements of a Brazilian public university that can facilitate workplace bullying, with university workers as participants. Therefore, in the research, the whole is more relevant than the perception of the categories in isolation. To ensure anonymity and protection of the participants, respondents of the online survey were identified with the letter "P", followed by their number (1-214), and the interviewees with the letter "E" and numbers from 1 to 12. All the ethical principles of confidentiality of participants were considered, as provided by the university's Ethics Committee on Human Research.

Results and Discussion

It is important to emphasize that the reflections and analyses that follow do not occur in isolation. The research participants reported various accounts of situations and characteristics of workplace bullying, occurring in a persistent and ongoing manner within the organizational culture and practices. As a way of illustrating the main situations of workplace bullying experienced — even though this is not the focus of this work — the questionnaire and interview responses highlighted a series of the most frequent issues within the university environment.

These items were classified according to Hirigoyen's (2015) categorization, from the most subtle to the most visible: Deliberate deterioration of working conditions (you were exposed to an excessive workload; you were forced to perform work below your level of competence; someone withheld information that could affect your job performance; areas or tasks under your responsibility were removed or replaced with more unpleasant or simpler tasks; you were asked to carry out pointless tasks or tasks with impossible deadlines; there is excessive supervision of your work), Isolation and refusal of communication (your opinions and viewpoints were ignored; you were ignored, excluded, or "put on ice"), Attack on dignity (rumors or gossip were spread about you; offensive comments were made about you {i.e., about your habits or origins}, your attitudes, or your private life; allegations were made against you; you were subjected to sarcasm or the target of excessive jokes), and Verbal, physical, or sexual violence (you were yelled at or were the target of gratuitous aggression (or anger was demonstrated towards you); you were the target of intimidating behaviors such as "finger pointing," invasion of your personal space, shoving, blocking your path or passage).

The analysis of the data allows for reflection on the nature of workplace bullying, which manifests both vertically and horizontally, reflecting the power structure and intergroup conflicts within the organizational culture. Downward vertical bullying (from managers

to subordinates) is the most prevalent, accounting for 47.8% of cases reported by victims. This type is directly associated with the abuse of power in a hierarchical culture, where managers use punishment, coercion, control, imposition of their own will over others and where there is a belief that some employees, especially technical staff, need to be controlled with an “iron fist”.

Horizontal bullying, among colleagues of the same hierarchical level, accounted for 23.2% of cases and is often linked to competition and group dynamics. Among faculty members, for example, peer-to-peer violence arises in the context of “competition for productivity grants” and “contestation for space.” Conflict between categories (professors and technical-administrative staff) further illustrates the theoretical model, as it can manifest both vertically, in the false belief that faculty are superior to technical staff and therefore can harass them, and horizontally, when employees from one category band together isolate or antagonize members of the other category. The analysis shows that, particularly, faculty members are the aggressors when analyzing cases involving other professors and/or technical staff.

The frequent and long-lasting bullying situations, briefly presented earlier, were those with the highest incidence according to the respondents' answers in the online questionnaire and the interviewees' responses. This allows for an overview of the main strategies adopted by aggressors in relation to the most common hostile practices in the institution. According to the participants, many of these practices have been frequent within the organization for a long time, and they question whether the organization is complicit in the situation. According to Nunes et al. (2019), workplace bullying is an organizational problem, as it occurs within the workplace environment, and the organization becomes co-responsible for its practice or for allowing hostile behaviors and actions. Heloani and Barreto (2018) understand that organizations neglect the triggering aspects of workplace bullying, and that management methods and organizational culture can serve as enabling factors for violence against workers.

Enabling factors of workplace bullying

In the current context in which Brazilians live, characterized by exacerbated competition, impunity, personal, political or group interests overlapping institutional goals, and many other actions that deviate from the ethical principles (Carbone, 2000; Pires & Macedo, 2006, Prates & Barros, 1997), it is expected that culture influences situations of bullying within its environment. Bearing this in mind, it was possible to identify the main aspects that were constantly highlighted by the participants: impunity, groups of power, politics, mischaracterization of public employees, ambiguity and institutional contradictions.

Impunity

One of the most cited elements by respondents is impunity, or lack of punishment for those who misbehave and/or present unethical and hostile actions, i.e. typical situations of a culture of impunity. In this case, this “sensation of impunity only increases the occurrence of bullying” (P23).

I think what really exists in university is a culture of impunity that is confused with democracy, unfortunately. [...] People say and do whatever they want regardless of whether it is disrespectful or not, thinking they have the right to do so because they are in the University. I think it does not work like that. I believe we must follow certain rules. Rules exist to allow peaceful and civil coexistence and civilized interaction between people. I think some boundaries should not be crossed for the sake of all (E1).

I don't know if it is a Brazilian characteristic, the lack of punishment, the impunity, and I think it ends up perpetuating certain practices, these protections that some people have. I think that's what keeps and allows workplace bullying to happen, regardless of the place it happens. [...] Because that's what I think, it's because of the impunity and protectionism that is perpetuated, but I don't know how we can fight it or not suffer from it. (E7)

The excerpts emphasize situations of impunity, lack of punishment and the protection of offenders, aspects not only present in the culture of the university, but also characteristic of the country in which they live in. By relating these issues to daily life, society creates a perspective of impunity in the public sphere, either at university, in government sectors, the State itself, and in the political sphere, in which individuals circumvent laws, rules and regulations, and little or no punishment is for their actions. According to Alcadipani and Crubellate (2003), impunity is the element that ensures the functioning of the critical points of Brazilian culture: formalism, flexibility, loyalty to people, and paternalism. Given that managers are generally responsible for punishment, it strengthens them in their position and power and tends to increase the degree of consistency among traits, such as formalism, paternalism, personalism, corporativism (Prates & Barros, 2007), and other 'isms' present in Brazilian culture and public service.

It is possible to infer from the participants' speeches that there is no punishment. Therefore, there is "[...] a knack for not punishing offenders" (P134), being this impunity due to the group to which they belong (P54), the lack of culture of servers to claim their rights and duties, which causes the victims to not look for ways to punish those who did not fulfill their duties (P56), or the excessive tolerance by managers (P45).

This impunity and the lack of consequences when a person goes beyond certain limits are related to excessive tolerance and protectionism of the perpetrator (E1; E7) – which are the prevailing cultural factors that enable workplace bullying at the university for the respondents. In this context, it appears that the management itself, which should curb these types of situations, ends up supporting and enabling them – "[...] acts of bullying are assumed and received – covertly – by managers, rather than curbed by them" (P85). The university leaves room for impunity, thus converting submission into a necessary condition to adapt and to live on, regardless of workplace bullying situations (Nunes et al., 2018; 2019).

The lack of punishment reflects institutional failures at the societal level and the macro system that controls productivity in universities. These institutional failures are opportunities for groups to build their bases of power and provoke the obedience of professors and technical administrators to the regulatory and normative system. Among the institutional failures, it's possible to mention the absence of a clear career system, which favors a culture of political relations and ties rather than a competency-based culture. Underlying this is leniency regarding performance. Furthermore, impunity is often related to the offender's group, or it can also become an action to create a relationship of dependency with whom they "saved" in a particular situation.

The perception of impunity, identified as a trait of Brazilian culture and public service (Alcadipani & Crubellate, 2003; Carbone, 2000; Pires & Macedo, 2006; Prates & Barros, 1997), manifests itself within the university environment in a specific way, sustaining a cycle of transgressions and institutional mistrust. Approximately 47.7% of staff members rarely and 17.3% never observed the application of punishment for violations of conduct. They attribute this reality to corporatism, in which "everyone helps each other to hide the dirt" (P133), and to power relations, where punishment depends on "who broke the rules" (P60). This culture materializes when cases are filed away or "put in a drawer" to protect an ally (P71), or when the victim of violence is advised not to file a complaint out of fear of retaliation, since the aggressor might be protected by "hidden forces" (P136).

To mitigate this culture, civil servants themselves suggest actions aimed at breaking the cycle of impunity. Among the proposals, the need for greater rigor and speed in inquiries and disciplinary administrative proceedings stands out, as well as the creation of permanent, multidisciplinary committees to analyze complaints, ensuring that those responsible for the investigation are not the same individuals who committed the infractions. Furthermore, effective monitoring and enforcement of the Public Servant's Professional Code of Ethics is highlighted as essential, indicating that strengthening formal control mechanisms is seen as a way to overcome the informality and protectionism that sustain impunity.

Groups of power

In addition to impunity, group-related issues such as category differentiation (faculty and technical-administrative staff), between new and longtime employees, and between permanent and substitute staff, also constitute elements present in the institution's culture, formal or informal, that they identify as favoring and/or sustaining situations of workplace bullying. These group dynamics have been present throughout the institution's history, and over time, the emphasis has shifted between one or the other.

When entering the realm of the category, professor and technical-administrative staff, the institution's own history shows that there was already a significant difference in educational background between these categories. That is, at the beginning of the institution, the professor staff had higher education/training than the technical-administrative staff, a situation that still exists today, although to a lesser extent. At the time, this fact was a reason to distinguish one from the other, to make one more important than the other, regardless of their main activities. "I've even heard comments that, historically, the university — since its creation — has developed a segregation between, for example, professors and technical staff, which is expressed in relationships of subordination of the latter to the former. Perhaps this has contributed to cases of workplace bullying" (P195). Over time, this gap in educational background has diminished, to the point where some technical staff now have higher educational qualifications than some professors. However, there still exists within the institution a "[...] culture that TAE's (technical-administrative staff) have a lower level of education, and that this is grounds for disrespect and bullying" (P160).

There are dominant political and power groups in the organization, ruling and dictating standards, and practices, formal and mainly informal policies in the University. The dominant groups have great power over the educational centers, departments and the organization itself. There are those who suggest that the "existence and maintenance of fiefdoms" (P17) are cultural factors that influence the occurrence of bullying. In other words, the existence of dominant groups and groups

of power at the University leads them to be called as “feudal lords”, who control their fiefdoms (centers, departments, offices, etc.), dictating the rules and behaviors that must be followed by the ‘servants’ and rival groups, and if they don’t follow the adopted procedures, may suffer hostilities. Thus, “[...] there are these divisions, very closed and divided groups. So, if I’m part of the power group, I won’t be harassed by this group [...] And if I’m not part, I have more chances of being harassed” (E8). That is, when someone does not meet the desired profile by the dominant group, it is more likely to be harassed or suffer some kind of different treatment (P197) if compared to group members, which are benefited in some way (149). Employees may be bullied because of their membership in a certain group or category that is not accepted by the dominant organizational culture (Einarsen et al., 2020; Heloani & Barreto, 2018; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Nunes et al., 2018; 2019), or by those who dictate the rules and regulations.

These groups also influence institutional policy, either to place one of their allies in power, or to disempower their rivals. In this political aspect, whether it is inside the organization or the state itself, there are also practices of favoritism towards group members and punishment for others. Consequently, dominant groups use temporary strategies in their management to allocate their members in positions of trust so that they may obtain and consolidate power. Rivals are displaced to other locations as a form of punishment (which can be understood as bullying) because they are not part of the same political group. Therefore, there is therefore an imbalance of power between the parties, which, according to Einarsen et al. (2020), often mirrors the formal power structure of the organizational context in which the workplace bullying scenario unfolds. Bullying can result from individual or group abuse of power, as well as taking advantage of the victim (s) lack of power (Einarsen et al., 2020; Heloani & Barreto, 2018; Hirigoyen, 2015; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Nunes et al., 2018).

The survey data show that dominant groups exert control over university sectors through processes that, although informal, have direct consequences for workplace bullying. This control is concretely

manifested in the occupation of positions and distribution of resources. One participant reported that in their department, “the decision-making and leadership power is in the hands of the Freemasons. Decisions serve their group and/or personal interests” (P37), which results in the privileged allocation of rooms and laboratories to members of the group to the detriment of others. Another staff member points out the existence of “group dictatorships” (P71) and a “dominant coalition” (P148) that has controlled a segment for over thirty years, using “patronage” as the criterion for leadership positions. And in a university environment, which is rigid and highly bureaucratic and political, the many spaces of power favor these situations of workplace bullying (Buendía, 2003).

The direct consequences of this process for workplace bullying were clearly articulated by the participants. The exclusion of those who do not belong to these “fiefdoms” creates an environment of vulnerability, where “if I am part of the group in power, I won’t be harassed [...]. And if I am not part of it, I am more likely to be harassed” (E8). According to Nunes (2011), there are “fiefdoms” or subcultures within the institution, which are controlled by groups or individuals who dictate the rules according to their own interests or those of their group, and in this sense, the integration among these is, depending on the situation, more politically and self-interestedly motivated than for the good of the institution itself.

Violence emerges as a tool to maintain the group’s hegemony, whether through the excessive workload imposed on non-members, such as faculty assigned more classes, or through the discrediting and isolation of those who hold opposing views, seen as “enemies” to be demoralized. Therefore, the process is not abstract; it occurs in the everyday management of people and resources, where belonging to the group determines who will benefit and who will be targeted by hostile practices.

Politics

Politics inside the organization, as in any other public sector, make the system work. For some people, the organizational culture at the university promotes bullying due to “[...] this political issue, because it is

used as a bargain chip. So, I think this leaves room” (E4). In other words, there is a ‘political culture’ that provides these cases of bullying (E12). Logically, if the worker belongs to the same dominant political line at the university, as discussed in the groups issue, this person may have more advantages. “All of them demand, do whatever they want, and nobody does something about it, depending on the Rectory’s political side and the one you are in, and if you are not, prepare yourself for hostile situations” (P10). Paternalism, a trait of the Brazilian culture and the public sector, represents an efficient way to identify and join a group, thus providing opportunities for rewards, and greater security (Carbone, 2000; Prates & Barros, 1997). That is to say, Brazilians know, for example, they should look for a ‘godfather’ as soon as possible when entering an organization. Through his closest power relations, the ‘godfather’ is the quickest path towards the top of the organization (Freitas, 1997).

Nevertheless, there are also external political interferences, in the form of political pressure that affect the university, such as Brazilian agencies, such as the Ministry of Education (MEC), the Federal Audit Court (TCU) and Comptroller General of the Union (CGU), among others, which request that specific actions should be conducted in the organization, producing pressure from top to bottom. “For me, it’s political pressure, like ‘I want it done’. [...] Then, the MEC ordered to do some things, and she’s pressuring the bottom so things get done. And then it is being distributed until me, who is at the end” (E4). This pressure from certain external sectors makes the workers who are at the base to be constantly and exaggeratedly charged for the execution of the requested work, which constitutes situations of bullying (Heloani & Barreto, 2018).

Mischaracterization of public employees

Another topic that is constantly referred to in the speeches of the participants is the mischaracterization of public employees, especially the technical-administrative staff, which are seen as ‘servile’ and lazy. Despite being numerous, technical administrators do not have as much power as professors in the university. In addition, they often

have a negative image in the internal and external community due to the impression Brazilian society has about them. The recurrent characteristics identified in the participants' interviews are laziness, lack of commitment, dependency, and conformism. One of speeches exposes part of this issue: "I think there is a lot of indolence like that. It's bad to think about it, because we keep saying 'oh, because public service is just like that', but it's not [...]. So, I think that sometimes there is a lot of indolence, but not in general" (E9).

These features can be related to the nature of human activity by Schein (2009), which identifies individuals as reactive, passive and accepting of the present reality. This way, they prefer to receive orders rather than to take any initiative. In another perspective, it is possible to infer that the perception of the technical-administrative staff can be associated to a spectator behavior, which is correlated to inertia, low critical awareness, low initiative, the lack of ability to perform tasks, and the transfer of difficulties and responsibilities to others (especially to the manager) (Prates & Barros, 1997). According to scholars, this is a common feature in countries with a high rate of power distance, as it is the case in Brazil.

On the other hand, the belief in subordination to professors by the technical-administrative employees is something natural and cultural to most of them (Nunes et al., 2018; 2019), as it is possible to observe in the following excerpts: "teacher call the technical employees as servers and call themselves as professors in a negative way. In fact, we are all servers, one from the teaching category, and the other from the technical-administrative category. [...] It's like as if we live to serve the teachers, and that's not true." (E11); "Teachers think they are in a superior position, while technicians don't think so. They believe everyone is equal, although older technicians put themselves in this inferior position in relation to teachers [...]" (E4). The acceptance of abusive behavior, or bullying, may be internalized and perpetuated through learning and socialization processes. In other words, bullying may be seen as something incorporated, becoming part of the culture (Heloani & Barreto, 2018; Nunes et al., 2019; Pheko et al., 2017; Salin & Hoel, 2020). In addition, according to the authors,

organizations characterized by a high degree of conformity and peer pressure tend to be prone to bullying.

The aforementioned aspects emphasize that these elements are culturally accepted, taught and perpetrated by the workers and organizational managers. In many situations, they are seen as a suitable way to act and behave. Additionally, some workers may have been victims of some of these practices in the organization, and end up turning into aggressors themselves throughout time, as they join dominant or power groups. Therefore, their behavior and practices, both in and outside the organization, are driven by the interest of the group – or their own – regardless of the goals of the university, thus setting up a patrimonial (Prates & Barros, 1997) and advantage-taking cultural trait (Carbone, 2000).

Finally, the participants noted that there are cultural practices that enable workplace bullying, which lead to violence, moral and sexual harassment, unethical conduct, competition, impunity, discrimination, and hostile and negative practices and behavior at the university. Even though there are negative reports about realistic situations at the university, it seems possible to take actions that can transform this aggressive environment, although culture is regarded as something difficult to change, according to Hofstede et al. (2010) and Schein (2009).

Ambiguity and Institutional contradictions

The role of ambiguity, which refers to the degree of uncertainty that workers feel about their tasks and work expectations, according to Einarsen, Raknes, and Matthiesen (1994) and Mathisen, Øgaard, and Einarsen (2012), is an aspect of work that is strongly associated with high levels of workplace bullying and other forms of antisocial behavior. In the case of the university, ambiguity is not limited to the worker's activities, but also extends to rules, norms, and procedures, which are applied or disregarded according to individual or group interests. Therefore, there are ambiguities in the rules, such as, for example, “some departments take advantage of ‘loopholes’ in the rules to impose their own will” (P16).

The clashes between formality and informality within the institution, often through norms and rules, create uncertainties in workers' behavior and work conduct. On the other hand, these are used by those who wish to benefit themselves or others, or to harm a particular adversary. Certainly, some of these clashes are motivated by changes in management, with each new cycle establishing a "new way" of handling matters within the institution. "There is no 'continuity' in work conduct. With each management, procedures are altered without an assessment of necessity, and people need to continuously adapt" (P159). The presence of ambiguity is a strong stressor for workers, as it brings uncertainties about the actual workings of the institution, relationships, and work; especially when their expectations are not met. In this way, the occurrence of ambiguity can lead to frustration, more conflicts, and deterioration interpersonal relationships, which further increases the incidence of workplace bullying (Skogstad et al., 2011).

The boundaries between acceptable behaviors and hostile behaviors can be ambiguous, especially when the institution's culture normalizes this type of behavior (Nemoto, 2010). In other words, the nature and practices at work, which are often ambiguous, along with the constant pressures on workers, "force" them to deal with these situations in a "friendly" manner and to endure unwanted and unpleasant situations experienced at work and within the institution (Hoel & Einarsen, 2003).

Within the institution, according to the reports of those surveyed, there is a significant disparity or disconnect between discourse and practice, especially among managers — who should be managing the institution with the primary goal of its development and that of its employees, rather than their own personal interests. This gap between discourse and practice is common in any society and within organizations; however, it should not be accepted or normalized as something typical. The inconsistency between the theory and practice of values, norms and rules, conduct, and organizational practices — already ingrained in the organizational culture — acts as a factor that influences the occurrence of workplace bullying.

The culture of anything, anywhere, and always influences the individuals who are part of it. Therefore, university culture can only influence the occurrence of workplace bullying. Its official policies and institutional values are certainly opposed to the practice, while the questionable conduct of some staff members encourages this type of abuse. I wouldn't even dare to try to measure the extent of influence for or against of each of these factors (P129).

One of the respondents' accounts clearly summarizes the distinction between institutional discourse and practice. It is not just a matter of emphasizing this situation within one administration or another, but rather something that is already historically rooted in the university, the State, and especially in Brazilian politics. It is possible to observe "a lot of theory and little practice" (P115) regarding the values advocated in formal norms and rules, in the code of conduct and professional ethics, and ultimately in behaviors and practices aimed at improving society, institutions, and individuals. What is seen, for example, is the "lack of practice of the values advocated by the organization" (P204), as observed in the category of Institutional Values.

Culturally, the subtlety of institutional discourse is aimed at the well-being and development of society, the staff, and the students. However, behind this rhetoric lies a differentiation of categories and groups, a practice of impunity for those who cross ethical boundaries, abuse of power, and many other behaviors and actions that foster an environment of conflict, competition, discord, and workplace bullying. As a result, workers are left powerless when it comes to forming positive expectations about the possibility of a cultural shift that would encourage good organizational and interpersonal practices and behaviors in the workplace (Pires & Macêdo, 2006).

The disparity between ethical discourse and the practice of impunity and corporatism generates profound distrust in formal channels for reporting misconduct. When an employee reports a case of harassment, they encounter a system where "the rules apply when it's convenient" (E2) and where "for friends, the laws; for enemies, the full force of the laws" (E10). In this scenario, where political interests and personal rela-

tionships override institutional norms, a permissive environment for violence is created. Conflict management, instead of following formal and impartial procedures, is shaped by “exchanges of favors” and by the “jeitinho,” making the confrontation of bullying not an institutional priority but rather an issue to be ignored or manipulated to protect the interests of those in power (Tolfo et al., 2015).

Finally, it is emphasized here that, according to the participants, there are cultural practices that foster bullying, as well as violence, moral and sexual harassment, unethical practices, competition, impunity, discrimination, and a wide range of hostile and negative actions and behaviors within the institution. Despite the many negative (real) aspects highlighted regarding situations that exist at the university, there are possibilities and actions that can transform this prevailing culture of bullying, even though, according to Hofstede et al. (2010) and Schein (2009), culture is considered difficult to change.

Final considerations

This article describes the cultural elements of a Brazilian public university that can facilitate workplace bullying based on the reports of professors and technical administrators’ servants. This way, it was possible to pinpoint cultural characteristics shown in the analyzed organization that enable workplace bullying practices, such as impunity, the presence of dominant, power and political groups.

Impunity, for those who misbehave and/or present unethical and hostile actions, is a recurrent element in participants’ responses. Impunity is an important Brazilian cultural trait that ensures the functioning and perpetuation of other cultural traits, such as formalism, flexibility, loyalty to people, and paternalism (Alcadipani & Crubellate, 2003). Furthermore, impunity is often related to the group to which the offender is associated.

The dominant, power and political groups establish and control the formal and informal policies, which are disciplinary strategies that

tend to regulate the duties and conduct of individuals and groups. In this context, these groups define the directions of the sectors they control, choose the ones who will benefit from it, and 'punish' those who are rivals or part of the opposition. In other words, traces of paternalism exist in relationships within the university.

Regarding the mischaracterization and stereotype of technical-administrative employees, negative characteristics have been identified, since they are seen as lazy and uncommitted to work. That is, public employees have a 'bad image' in the eyes of society, and therefore they may be victims of bullying in certain circumstances.

The university, as a complex organization, has multiple interests, as it was possible to observe through the survey, putting its main objectives into the background if compared to personal and/or different group interests. The organization, therefore, represents the contradictions in Brazilian society. Although many workers come and go throughout time, there is continuity and perpetuation of their interests. Therefore, it appears that some practices diverge from social needs, though one of the institutional objectives is to provide service to society.

It is understood that the university culture has been built based on the appreciation of the proximity to power, facilitated by the contrast between the formalism of bureaucracy through rules and regulations, and the informality traits of Brazilian organizational culture, the seek and abuse of power. In other words, the world of academia is not entirely different from the industrial reality: it is an environment of seduction and conflict, competition and demand, speeches and promises.

Finally, it is possible to infer that the organizational culture of the university reproduces cultural elements from public service and Brazilian cultures, as identified in this research. Although the debated elements are cultural and historically present in these cultures, they can be changed. Nevertheless, this transformation is not the sole responsibility of the university and its workers, since they are affected by other cultures, especially regional and national ones. Thus, the cultural transformation should involve more than these two 'actors', workers and universities, and incorporate society in general and its institutions.

Practical implications for university management

The study's conclusions indicate that combating workplace bullying at university goes beyond isolated actions and requires cultural and structural changes. Although complete transformation depends on a broader social process, the research findings provide a roadmap of practical implications that university management can implement to mitigate the occurrence of violence and strengthen a culture of respect. The following suggestions stem directly from the perceptions and needs expressed by the staff members who participated in the study.

One of the main weaknesses identified is the distrust of institutional channels. The main reason cited was the disbelief that any action would be taken ("nothing will come of it") (P37; P72; P96; P133; P135; P136; P145; P159; P170; P177), in addition to "fear of retaliation" (P20; P25; P201), and the perception that there is "too much corporatism" (P35; P133). To address this issue, it is suggested to implement more effective and secure reporting mechanisms, such as an "official online form for reporting" (P19) and the creation of "permanent committees" (P44) with a multidisciplinary composition, including professionals from psychology and law, to ensure a technical and impartial analysis of cases. Such measures can increase employees' trust and break the culture of impunity. In addition to establishing policies and actions for preventing and combating bullying, as set forth in Decree No. 12,122 of July 30, 2024, and NR 01 and 05.

Additionally, the study reveals a failure in institutional communication, as participants stated that the university does not make its position on workplace bullying clear. Therefore, it is imperative to develop awareness and ongoing training programs. Staff members propose carrying out a broad "media campaign, with posters, booklets, emails, [...] and decentralized lectures" (P19). Training of managers and supervisors is particularly crucial, as the research points to the "lack of preparation for managing people" (P123; P124; P162; P186) as a factor that contributes to bullying. Training initiatives on conflict management, legislation, and the duties outlined in the Code of Ethics can equip leaders to act preventively.

Contributions, limitations, and suggestions for future research

The article contributes to the identification of elements present in the organizational, national and public culture that influence the occurrence of workplace bullying, thus helps deepen the theory and consequently for the construction of policies and actions to prevent and combat this violence in the most several institutions, especially higher education.

The main contribution of this study lies in the analysis of workplace bullying from the perspective of organizational culture, an approach that remains largely unexplored within the context of Brazilian universities. By identifying and characterizing cultural elements such as impunity, the influence of power groups, and the hierarchy among categories as factors that foster and sustain violence, the work advances the understanding of bullying not as an individual misconduct, but as a phenomenon that is socially constructed and maintained by the practices and values of an organization.

However, like all empirical research, this work has theoretical and methodological limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sensitive nature of the topic may have influenced the quality of the information, with the possibility that participants resisted, withheld data, remained defensive, or exaggerated to impress the researcher. Secondly, data collection did not cover the entire target population, and the period during which the questionnaire was administered coincided with holidays and the end of the academic semester, which may have resulted in bias in the sample of 214 respondents. Finally, the choice of a single case study, although it allows for a deeper description of a particular reality, limits the generalization of the findings to other higher education institutions.

Given these limitations and the complexity of the subject, the article paves the way for future research. It suggests replicating similar studies in other institutional settings, such as private universities, to establish comparisons and identify different cultural manifestations of workplace bullying. It is also proposed to conduct investigations that

delve deeper into the role of subcultures present in various centers and departments in shaping violence. Such studies may contribute to the development of a more robust theoretical framework on the phenomenon and support more effective prevention and combat policies in the academic environment.

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